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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000015

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SUBJECT: THE GLOVES ARE OFF: CHAVEZ SAYS HE WILL CLOSE RCTV

REF: 06 CARACAS 1909

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Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

11. (U) SUMMARY: President Chavez on December 28 made his strongest statement yet threatening the broadcasting license of major opposition television outlet Radio Caracas Television (RCTV). During a New Year's address to the Armed Forces, Chavez stated unequivocally that RCTV's license for over-the-air broadcasting - which he asserted was scheduled to lapse in March - will not be renewed. Chavez has regularly accused RCTV and other independent outlets of actively supporting anti-government activity, especially the April 2002 coup. He first opened fire publicly on their broadcast licenses before a national audience in June 2006 (reftel). Chavez's pronouncement provoked strong reactions on the part of some Venezuelan media and civil society, as well as several international organizations, forcing Minister of Information Willian Lara to reiterate the legality and "apoliticality" of not renewing RCTV's license. Chavez's placement of RCTV in the crosshairs is typical of his posture towards critical media: he will either eliminate it or cow it into silence. END SUMMARY

CHAVEZ ROARS

12. (U) On December 28, addressing the National Armed Forces for a New Year's address, President Hugo Chavez stated that he will not renew the broadcasting license for Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), which he asserted expires in March. RCTV, with over half a century of broadcasting, is Venezuela's oldest commercial television network, and is second in ratings. RCTV particularly rankles Chavez because, with its nationwide broadcast capabilities, it maintains a large nationwide audience, reaching substantially more people than do cable or Caracas-only outlets. Chavez called it a coup-mongering outlet, as he has done repeatedly over the last six months, and said RCTV should "pack its bags." Chavez said that Venezuela will not tolerate media outlets that operate "in the service of coup-mongering, against the people, against the nation, against national independence, and against the dignity of the Republic."

LARA CLARIFIES

¶3. (U) Minister of Communications and Information Willian Lara announced in a December 29 press conference that RCTV will be forced to cease operations on May 27, 2007. Lara highlighted an excerpt from the May 27, 1987, Public Gazette, which established twenty-year licenses for private television stations. Lara acknowledged the signing of new contractual language in 2001 between RCTV and the Ministry of Infrastructure, but denied that such language constituted a renewal, as is argued by RCTV President Marcel Granier. Lara emphasized that the shuttering of RCTV will not be an expropriation, as the physical installations would still belong to shareholders, nor will it be a revocation, as the contract would merely be allowed to lapse.

¶4. (U) Lara indicated as early as December 3 - the day of Chavez's re-election - that the fate of the private television station would be left to a referendum. On December 11, Lara reiterated this idea, reflecting on a suggestion Chavez made during the campaign that the licenses of all four of the leading privately-owned national networks (Globovision, Venevision, RCTV, and Televen) be subject to national referenda. Lara retreated, however, during his December 29 press conference, saying the government of Venezuela believes that by virtue of re-electing Chavez, the people also approved of this measure, especially since Chavez foreshadowed such a move as a candidate.

¶5. (U) Both Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel and Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro toed the party line in separate speaking engagements following Chavez's announcement. Rangel denied that the measure against RCTV was "political retaliation," and that such charges by RCTV merely add weight to the charges that it is working against the interests of the nation. For his part, Maduro characterized the action against RCTV as the end of an era of dictatorial and

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manipulative use of the television airwaves. Maduro said that if RCTV mounts any sort of judicial challenge before any entity, "Venezuela is going to win."

WHAT IS RCTV?

¶6. (U) RCTV, launched in 1953 as a radio station, was the third television station to begin operations in Venezuela. The two previous stations no longer exist, making RCTV the oldest continually-operating television station in the country. RCTV is a VHF transmitter and can therefore be seen by any Venezuelan with a television and antenna - a substantially larger audience than its cable or regional competitors can boast. In accordance with telecommunications law, RCTV designates five hours of daily programming to information and opinion, with light entertainment such as the popular "telenovelas" (soap operas) comprising the rest of the time.

¶7. (U) RCTV President Marcel Granier and RCTV's news and editorial content are undoubtedly anti-BRV. Granier is a lawyer by trade, but, in his position at the head of a major media entity, is outspoken and articulate in his criticism of the government. Chavez continually insinuates RCTV played a role in the April 2002 coup attempt and the prolonged workers strike that began at the end of that year. RCTV, along with other private television stations, did air free advertisements for the opposition during this period. Also, when Chavez interrupted coverage of an opposition march on Miraflores on April 11, 2002, to make a speech, RCTV (again, along with other stations) cut from Chavez's speech to cover a shooting taking place at the march. Most private networks, including RCTV, quickly recognized the legitimacy of the interim government of Pedro Carmona.

EVERYBODY ELSE HOLLERS

¶18. (U) Reaction to Chavez's announcement was swift and negative. Carlos Lauria, Director of the Americas Program for the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, expressed concern over the manner in which the announcement was made. Lauria said that a national entity, Conatel, is in charge of media licenses, and for such a pronouncement to come from the President, while dressed in full military uniform and addressing the National Armed Forces was a worrisome blurring of organizational responsibilities. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) labeled the decision "grave" and called on the Venezuelan government to reconsider its position and "guarantee an independent system of concession and renovation of licenses" for television media.

¶19. (U) The President of the Commission on Freedom of Press and Information of the Inter American Press Association (SIP), Gonzalo Marroquin, condemned Chavez's pronouncement and said it was nothing more than a political "punishment" for RCTV's not supporting the Chavez regime. Andres Canizalez, an investigator with the Andres Bello Catholic University's Center for Communications Investigation and former President of Venezuela's Institute of Press and Society, echoed Marroquin's concerns. Canizalez asserts that Chavez is lashing out at RCTV only because of its editorial policies. Both RCTV's Granier and Canizalez point out that neither Chavez nor any government entity has identified a single violation of the law by RCTV. Canizalez also echoed Lauria's message, that this ruling was a Chavista fiat, more than a duly considered and deliberated decision undertaken by the appropriate entity, Conatel.

¶10. (U) The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the OAS, Venezuelan national Ignacio Alvarez, interrupted his holiday vacation to register concern over Chavez's pronouncement. Alvarez emphasized that it is "of extreme importance" for freedom of expression in Venezuela that the government acts to guarantee the existence of independent media outlets and their divergent editorial prerogatives so as to assure an environment of democratic pluralism - not to stifle it. RCTV is no stranger to the OAS, as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has agreed to hear RCTV's complaints of government-orchestrated violence against the channel's installations in 2003.

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¶11. (U) The Church has also weighed in, with surprising speed and strength. The Archbishop of Caracas, Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino, called on the government to review its decision. Saying "the country wins if there are different media outlets and complete freedom of opinion," Urosa urged the government to make a greater effort to reach an understanding with RCTV. Urosa said that even though he respected Chavez's decision, it was precipitous, and he suggested that Chavez reconsider.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has long telegraphed its intention to punish opposition media in Venezuela, and Embassy has reported regularly over the last several months on the systematic and authoritarian effort to cow media critical of the government into submission or scare them into silence. The gloves are now off, and it appears Chavez may be moving from scare tactics to execution. It seems a decision has been made to make RCTV the sacrificial lamb - and object lesson. The targeting of RCTV, not new but now more focused, comes on the heels of the less significant but still noteworthy purchase of small independent outlet CMT by state-owned Telesur. Factor in the BRV takeover of the

English newspaper "The Daily Journal," and Chavez's strategy of "plomo o plata" ("I will eliminate you or own you") becomes clear. Chavez has a track record of making sweeping public statements and later softening the rhetoric. While possible in this case, especially in the face of near unanimous criticism outside of Venezuela, Chavez has had it in for RCTV since 2002. In the license issue, Chavez has once again used nebulous legal camouflage to institute measures that fundamentally undermine democracy.

WHITAKER